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Statement submitted by the International Alliance of Women, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

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Statement

It is generally accepted that the majority of poor people across the world are women. Of the estimated 1.1 billion poor people in the world, 60 to 70 per cent are women.

Poverty means poor health and premature death, social exclusion, lack of access to basic services, having no say in basic decisions affecting one's life and vulnerability to violence. Poor people have no choices in what they can do with their lives. Women, in addition to all that, have to contend with systematic discrimination, which creates extensive poverty, and perpetuates it.

In many countries women are prevented by traditional custom and law from owning land, and thus they cannot apply for loans using land as collateral. This makes it harder for them to climb out of the poverty trap.

Poor women are particularly disadvantaged even in relation to poor men within their own societies. But why is this so? Inequalities in power between women and men help create and perpetuate women's poverty.

If deprivation among poor women is a matter of grossly unequal power relations, then the process of the empowerment of women is part of the solution to the problem. How can this empowerment take place? By enabling poor women to exercise their human rights as a legal and political tool to bring about social justice.

As an example, we can refer to the poor black women in South Africa who marched against the poor laws and participated in the struggle against apartheid and racism. In the United States of America, black women played a very active role in poor black churches in urban areas, and they continue to do so in advocating for social development policies.

Taking a rights perspective on women's poverty, we perceive poor women as claimants of justice, as economic agents and agents of positive change, not helpless charity cases. The problem is, however, that very often women's rights are invisible. They may exist on paper but they mean little if the behaviour and attitudes that often underlie the abuse of women's human rights are ignored. We have to work hard to change gender stereotypes within the family, in schools, in work, in politics and in the economy.

Unfortunately, women, in particular poor women, are experiencing further violations of their human rights as a result of the current crisis, which itself combines multiple crises, including the global economic recession, the devastating effects of climate change and the ongoing food and energy crisis.

Because of ingrained discrimination and structural disadvantages, women have restricted access to services and social protection that could help them to deal with the shocks of such crises, and they are thus exposed to increased risks, with the result that they fall further into a situation of disadvantage and exclusion, and non-respect of their human rights.

Economic recession in many developed and developing countries has a disproportionately negative effect on women's right to work. In the formal sector, women were already facing discrimination with greater job insecurity and lower wages than men and, as a result, were the first to lose their jobs when the crisis hit.

Increasing unemployment and decreasing household incomes increase unpaid work, including caregiving mostly done by women and girls, and force women to turn to vulnerable and informal employment. The overrepresentation of women in insecure forms of work undermines women's rights, perpetuates gender inequalities in societies and limits the prospects for sustainable economic progress.

Moreover, economic recession is putting pressure on families and creates conditions associated with increased domestic/intimate relationship violence. Migrant women also face a heightening sense of job insecurity, thus making them more vulnerable to abuse.

Women need to participate fully in the decision-making processes in order to ensure attention to gender perspectives in policy responses to the financial crisis. States should take measures to ensure a gender approach in the design and implementation of recovery measures.

There is a need to support women's right to work by recognizing and making more visible the unpaid work performed by women and to reduce its burden on women by promoting the equal sharing of responsibilities between men and women in caregiving.

Recovery measures should promote women's economic and social rights by prioritizing investments in education and skills development for women, enhancing their productive activity, ensuring that they receive microfinancing, providing investments in sectors where women make up a considerable proportion of the labour force and undertaking gender budgeting to ensure that women benefit equally from public investment.

The crisis is an opportunity to rethink the economic order. We need to move towards an economic order that supports the survival of humanity in a humanistic way, a solidarity-based and justice-oriented economic order that promotes gender equality and human rights for women and men, and that gives preference to cooperation and provision for all over unlimited growth and the maximization of profits.